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State, EPA still assessing damage to waste pits

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San Jacinto Waste Pits Superfund Site

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The governor says two sites — one in Pasadena and the other on the San Jacinto River — will require “additional precautionary assessment efforts.”

The Texas Commission on Environmental Quality inspected 17 state Superfund sites. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency assessed 43 other sites.

The EPA has designated the Superfund sites as being among America’s most intensely contaminated places.

Floods from Harvey have raised concerns the floodwaters may wash in pollution. Abbott said it is “imperative” the state work with the federal EPA to ensure the safety of people in those areas.

The San Jacinto Waste Pits site has a temporary armored cap designed to prevent migration of hazardous material. The EPA remedial manager is onsite and overseeing the assessment this weekend.

Crews continue to survey portions of the cap that are submerged. There are some areas where rock has been displaced and the liner is exposed. Also, the EPA has dive teams at the ready to survey the cap underwater if needed.

The cap was first installed in 2011 as a temporary solution. It consists of 59,000 tons of stone and thick protective layers of geo-technical materials that covers about 16 acres.

Posted: Sunday, September 10, 2017 12:00 am | Updated: 7:25 am, Sun Sep 10, 2017.

By Christopher James

0 comments

The U.S. EPA continues to survey portions of the San Jacinto River Waste Pits while making minor repairs in wake of Harvey.

This week, EPA Remedial Project Manager Gary Miller was onsite overseeing the assessment of the protective cap that keeps toxic material contained from the San Jacinto River.

Texas Gov. Greg Abbott says state and federal environmental protection officials have found no major problems at all but two of 60 Superfund sites hit by Hurricane Harvey.



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The EPA says some rock has been displaced, exposing some of the liner of the cap, but the potentially responsible (international Paper and McGinnes Industrial Maintenance Corporation) parties have mobilized heavy equipment and are placing rock on the armored cap to repair the defensive surface.

The EPA says the liner is in place and functional, which means they don't have any indication that the underlying waste materials have been exposed. Even though two-thirds of the site is still under water.

"(On Friday) I observed workers in a boat on the northeastern edge of the pits poking the cap to look for damage," said Jacquelyn Young, director of Texas Health and Environmental Alliance. "They were wearing very little protective gear which is concerning. On the northwest portion of the cap there was construction equipment moving rocks around."

Although the cap undergoes regular monitoring and maintenance, it has received constant damage since being built in 2011. In fact the armored cap has required many repairs and extensive maintenance nearly every year. From about 200 square feet of stone eroding in 2012, to five areas missing part, or all, armor stone with exposed geotextile in 2013, to 500 feet of cap missing or deficient in 2015.

Because of its past, environmental activists are finding it hard to believe that the cap wasn't damaged after the 500-year flood event that was Harvey. And they want facts to back up the EPA's claims.

"Advocates for removal have requested the EPA to survey the underwater portion of the pits prior to allowing the (responsible parties) to add more rock," said Young. "It's important this is done in the according order so damage isn't 'covered up.'"

Last Tuesday, Young, along with the Galveston Bay Foundation and Coastal Conservation Association, called on the EPA to permanently remove the waste as soon as possible.

They want the EPA to stay true to its proposed remedy of full remediation before another catastrophic event like Harvey happens again.

Since proposing the removal of about 152,000 cubic yards of contaminated materials, the EPA has been reviewing comments before finalizing the cleanup solution.

The EPA says they will announce its decision later this year.

For decades the waste pits sat exposed in the San Jacinto River unbeknownst to the community, contaminating the river with mercury, PCBs, furans and cancer-causing dioxins.

The pits, located just north of the Interstate 10 bridge between Highlands and Channelview, was used as a dumpsite for paper mill sludge from Champion Paper in Pasadena in the mid-1960s.

Once the site was filled to capacity, the company abandoned the pits and like the rest of the surrounding area the pits subsided, exposing the toxic chemicals to the San Jacinto River.

Since its discovery in 2005, the EPA has placed the site on its National Priorities List and oversaw completion of an armored cap (2011) to temporarily address the release of dioxin in the river.

For more information about the site, visit <https://www.epa.gov/tx/sjrwpl>.



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